

Ask a Master Gardener
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Christmas Plants: Facts and Myths

Q: Someone told me that poinsettias and mistletoe contain deadly poisons. Is this true or a myth? Jack C.

A: This question comes up almost every Christmas season. While it has some basis in fact, in truth the danger is greatly exaggerated.

Poinsettias can be mildly toxic, but it is a myth that they are extremely poisonous to people and animals. While there is a mountain of documentation to support this, still the myth persists.

Walter Reeves says that he searched several references including calling the Georgia Poison Control Center (404-616-9000; 1-800-222-1222; www.georgiapoisoncenter.org) and they all confirmed that this is a myth. He goes on to say that this myth was disproven by a project at Ohio State University in 1975. They do contain a latex sap that is an eye irritant, but not poisonous.

This myth apparently dates back to 1919 when a two year old child was erroneously reported to have died from ingesting poinsettia leaves. Snopes, the urban legend watchdog, as well as several government agencies, health groups, veterinary groups and plant experts agree that it is a myth that poinsettias are deadly to children and pets. Snopes says that The American Medical Association's "Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants" indicates that ingesting poinsettia leaves may cause occasional vomiting. The ASPCA Animal Poison Center on its website says that poinsettias are mildly toxic to animals. The American Veterinary Medicine Association of America says: "*Poinsettia ingestions typically induce only mild to moderate irritation in the gastrointestinal tract of pets. Keeping the plant out of reach to avoid stomach upset is a good idea, but pet owners don't need to banish poinsettias from their homes for fear of a fatal exposure.*"

In mythology the Vikings believed mistletoe could raise humans from the dead. The Druids believed that it could perform miracles from healing diseases, to granting fertility to humans and animals, to protecting people from witchcraft. The Druids also considered it and the oak tree that bore it as sacred. At one time, because of its association with pagan ceremonies, many churches banned it from Christmas ceremonies.

Mistletoe is a Christmas decoration that plays a very romantic role, but it also has a reputation for being poisonous. Unfortunately, mistletoe's reputation is deserved! While the berries may appear edible, especially to children and pets, according to Kim Coder, a professor of tree health care with the University of Georgia's Warnell School of Forestry

and Natural Resources, while some people might be able to eat mistletoe and not suffer any adverse affects, others will have severe stomach aches, possible seizures and if they are allergic to it, even death.

Jeff Jackson, wildlife specialist at UGA, says mistletoe is spread by many birds, especially mockingbirds, as well as the wind. They eat the mistletoe berries in the absence of most other food sources during the winter months. Mockingbirds often live in populated areas, perching on open branches high in trees where the mistletoe grows. So the birds spread berries and seeds from tree to tree.

Dr. Coder says it not only harms people and pets, it damages our trees. Many who are not familiar with mistletoe do not realize that it does not grow in the ground like other plants, but in the tops of tall, living, hardwood trees. It works its way through the bark and into the tissue of the tree to absorb water and nutrients which results in damage to the host tree especially during a drought. This damage will stress the tree and if left unchecked may even result in the death of old or weak trees.

In the article **Holiday Plant Toxicity** in a blog from The University of Vermont Extension, Dr. Leonard Perry reminds us several other plants often used during the holidays have some toxic properties. Small amounts of **holly berries** are not toxic, but eating large quantities can cause nausea, abdominal pain, or vomiting. Every part of the **Jerusalem (Christmas) Cherry** is toxic, causing stomach pain, vomiting, headache, drowsiness and other more severe symptoms. And the bulb of the Amaryllis may be toxic to pets, but small amounts cause few if any symptoms in humans.

As always it is better to be safe than sorry, so it is best to keep appealing, colorful plants out of the reach of children and pets.

All of the additives: aspirin, bleach, sodas, sugar and other preservatives that you hear recommended to prolong the life of your live tree are not helpful. The National Christmas Tree Association says using fresh, clean water is best for live trees. The chlorine level will not harm your tree and will help to retard fungal and bacterial growth. The water will evaporate quickly, so remember to check the water level every day or two.

For more information visit the Live Tree Tip on the Extension Master Gardener blog: <https://blogs.extension.org/mastergardener/2012/12/10/holidayplants>. Also, please make your live tree truly green and recycle!

For more information on all your horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Cooperative Extension Carroll County Office at 900 Newnan Road, 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.